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## Sleep - children and nightmares

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## Summary

- Nightmares can start when the child is about two years old, and reach a peak between the ages of three and six years.
- About one quarter of children have at least one nightmare every week.
- Nightmares usually occur later in the sleep cycle, between 4am and 6am.
- Try to be supportive and understanding.

Most children experience nightmares from time to time. Frightening dreams can start when the child is about two years old, and reach a peak between the ages of three and six years. Nightmares usually occur later in the sleep cycle, from 4am to 6am, but the frequency differs from one child to the next.

Your child may have only a few scary dreams a year, or be troubled by nightmares much more often. About one quarter of children have at least one nightmare every week. A common theme is being chased by a frightening person or animal.

The cause of nightmares isn't known, but it is thought to be the ordinary stresses and strains of growing up. Children who have experienced a traumatic event, for example, tend to have frequent nightmares for the next six months or so.

## A range of possible causes

Some of the possible causes of nightmares include:

- The ordinary stresses and strains of growing up
- A traumatic event, such as an accident or surgery
- Fever
- An active imagination.

## Coping with your child's nightmare

Suggestions include:

- Go to your child as soon as you can. If your child's bedroom is far from yours and you can't be sure to hear them when they call or cry, consider installing a baby monitor.
- Cuddle and reassure your child. Talk calmly and gently.
- Appreciate that your child's feelings are genuine.
- Be prepared to stay with them until they have calmed down. If your child is particularly frightened, you may need to soothe them with a favourite (but relaxing) activity, such as reading a book together.
- Your child may want to talk to you about their nightmare. Encourage them to come up with alternate endings for the nightmare that are happy or funny.

## Don't make things worse

You may, without meaning to, make the situation worse. Do not:

- **Ignore the child** – if you refuse to go to them, your child will only get more upset and frantic.
- **Get angry** – you may think your child is 'putting it on' for attention, or else you don't appreciate a broken sleep. Either way, expressing anger or tension will only upset your child even more.
- **Allow them to sleep with you** – when you're tired and wishing for an easy solution, it's tempting to take the child back to bed with you, but this tactic suggests to the child that sleeping in their own bed is what causes the nightmare. Eventually, they may insist on sleeping with you all the time.

## Prevention suggestions

It isn't possible to stop your child from ever having another nightmare, but you may be able to reduce the frequency of bad dreams. Suggestions include:

- Make sure your child doesn't watch frightening shows on television, or read scary books.
- Consider your child's daily routine. Is anything troubling them? Stressful events that could trigger a spate of nightmares include a new sibling, moving house or starting school.
- Talk about dreams together, and explain that everyone has dreams and occasional nightmares.
- If your child is troubled by a recurring nightmare, help them to explore its meaning through drawing, writing or play acting. Thinking about the nightmare creatively – especially when the child comes up with a happier ending or 'makes friends' with the nightmare character – can help to defuse the power of the dream.
- Seek professional advice if needed. See your doctor for information and referral.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Maternal and child health nurse
- Parent Line Tel. 132 289
- Tweddle Child and Family Health Service Tel. (03) 9689 1577

## Things to remember

- Nightmares can start when the child is about two years old, and reach a peak between the ages of three and six years.
- About one quarter of children have at least one nightmare every week.
- Nightmares usually occur later in the sleep cycle, between 4am and 6am.
- Try to be supportive and understanding.

### References

- *Nightmares*, 2001, Parenting and Child Health, Child and Youth Health, State Government of South Australia, Adelaide. [More information here.](#)
- *Nightmares and night terrors in children*, 2002, familydoctor.org, American Academy of Family Physicians, USA. [More information here.](#)

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- [Growth charts for children](#)  
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[Everyone's immunisation needs are different and are influence by your health, lifestyle, age and occupation...](#)
- [Parenting services](#)  
[Parenting is one of the most important tasks we undertake but it doesn't always come naturally...](#)

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- [Child development \(7\) - three to four years](#)  
[Your child is starting to understand social skills like sharing and being kind, but they can only practise these skills for a short time while feeling safe and happy...](#)
- [Children's feet and shoes](#)

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[A child learning to walk receives important sensory information from the soles of their feet, and shoes can make walking more difficult...](#)

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[Dyslexia is a type of specific learning difficulty \(SLD\) in which the person has difficulties with language and words...](#)

- [Growing pains](#)

[Growing pains may cause a lot of pain but they are harmless and can respond to simple treatments...](#)

- [Growth and development - primary school children](#)

[Always see your doctor if you are concerned about your child's growth or weight...](#)

- [Growth charts for children](#)

[Babies and young children do not usually grow in a perfectly smooth way, but instead grow in 'bursts'...](#)

- [Growth hormone](#)

[Some athletes and bodybuilders wrongly believe that taking synthetic growth hormone will help build up their muscles...](#)

- [Immunisation history statements for children](#)

[By law, parents or guardians must provide an Immunisation History Statement when enrolling children in any childcare service, kindergarten or primary school in Victoria...](#)

- [Left-handedness](#)

[If your child is naturally left-handed, don't try to force them to use their right hand...](#)

- [Puberty](#)

[Adjusting to the many changes that happen around puberty can be difficult for both parents and young people...](#)

- [Teeth development in children](#)

[Teething symptoms are common in children and can be managed without medications...](#)

## **Behaviour and learning**

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- [10 tips to prepare your child for high school](#)

[Visit the school before the school year starts ... 10 tips to prepare your child for high school...](#)

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[You can help your child overcome anxiety by taking their fears seriously and encouraging them to talk about their feelings...](#)

- [Bullying](#)

[Parents can help with bullying by supporting their child and involving the authorities to find solutions...](#)

- [Children and literacy](#)

[Your child is literate if they know how to speak, read and write their language with confidence...](#)

- [Children and shyness](#)

[If your child's shyness is especially debilitating, you may like to consider professional help from a counsellor or psychologist...](#)

- [Children and sibling rivalry](#)

[Sibling rivalry is a common problem, particularly among children who are the same sex and close together in age...](#)

- [Conduct disorder](#)

[Children with untreated conduct disorder are at increased risk of problems including substance use, personality disorders and mental illnesses...](#)

- [Cyberbullying \(online bullying\)](#)

[Cyberbullying \(or online bullying\) happens when technology is used to bully someone...](#)

- [Discipline and children](#)

[Disciplining your child means teaching them responsible behaviour and self-control...](#)

- [Expressive language disorder](#)

[Expressive language disorder means that a child has difficulty with verbal, written or other information...](#)

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[If your child is naturally left-handed, don't try to force them to use their right hand...](#)

- [Oppositional defiant disorder \(ODD\)](#)

[Oppositional defiant disorder is a childhood behavioural problem characterised by constant disobedience and hostility...](#)

- [Peer pressure](#)

[Peer groups can be a very positive influence on your teenager's life...](#)

- [Receptive language disorder](#)

[Receptive language disorder means the child has difficulties with understanding what is said to them...](#)

- [Sleep - children and nightmares](#)

[Your child may have only a few scary dreams a year, or be troubled by nightmares much more often...](#)

- [Young children and communication](#)

[Children thrive with words of encouragement and praise...](#)

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- [Body image and diets](#)

[Some people diet because they have a poor body image, not because they want to be a healthy weight...](#)

- [Breakfast](#)

[Children who skip breakfast may lack sufficient vitamins and minerals including iron, calcium, zinc and vitamin B2...](#)

- [Childcare and healthy eating](#)

[Childcare centres should provide healthy meals for your children...](#)

- [Children's diet - fruit and vegetables](#)

[If you eat and enjoy fruit and vegetables every day, your child may eventually follow your lead...](#)

- [Eating tips for preschoolers](#)

[Children are able to decide how much food they need for activity and growth if allowed to eat according to their appetite...](#)

- [Eating tips for school children](#)

[Snacks are an important part of a healthy diet for active children, so offer nutritious as well as high energy snacks...](#)

- [Food for sport - tucker talk tips](#)

[Carbohydrate is the most important nutrient for athletes...](#)

- [Healthy eating – school lunches](#)

[Simple ways to make your child's school lunch healthier...](#)

- [Healthy eating tips](#)

[A good balance between exercise and food intake is important to maintain a healthy body weight...](#)

- [Lunch boxes - healthy ideas](#)

[Healthy foods that are great for school lunch boxes...](#)

- [Lunch boxes - healthy shopping ideas \(video\)](#)

[Victorian State Public Health Nutritionist Veronica Graham takes us shopping for the right foods to include in your child's lunchbox...](#)

- [Lunch boxes - how to make them healthy \(video\)](#)

[Victorian State Public Health Nutritionist Veronica Graham shares three healthy and delicious lunchbox examples for the kids and provides some great food preparation tips to save you time throughout...](#)

- [Lunch boxes - menu planner](#)

[By planning ahead, you can make sure that your child's lunch box has each of the six key elements of a healthy lunchbox...](#)

- [Lunch box tips](#)

[Encourage children to help choose and prepare their own healthy snack or lunch...](#)

- [Soft drinks, juice and sweet drinks - children](#)

[Encourage children to drink and enjoy water. Sweet drinks such as juice, cordial and soft drinks may cause health problems for children if consumed in large amounts...](#)

- [Sticking to New Year's resolutions](#)

[New Year's resolutions and how to stick to them...](#)

- [Vegetarian diets and children](#)

[Children can eat a vegetarian diet and stay healthy as long as their extra nutritional needs are met...](#)

### Keeping active

- [Children – keeping them active](#)

[A young child is naturally active, so build upon their inclinations to use their body...](#)

- [Food for sport - tucker talk tips](#)

[Carbohydrate is the most important nutrient for athletes...](#)

- [Gardening for children](#)

[Children can learn new skills, have fun and develop self-confidence when they grow their own plants...](#)

- [Healthy active Koori kids - tucker talk tips](#)

[Good nutrition and physical exercise help to keep Koori kids healthy and avoid diseases when they get older...](#)

- [Parent's guide for active girls](#)

[Physical activity is an important part of health and wellbeing, and girls should remain active as they grow up...](#)

- [Sport and children](#)

[Make sure that some family outings offer opportunities for physical activity, such as playing sport together...](#)

- [Sticking to New Year's resolutions](#)

[New Year's resolutions and how to stick to them...](#)

### Managing weight

- [Body mass index \(BMI\)](#)

[Body mass index or BMI is an approximate measure of your total body fat...](#)

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[Snacks are an important part of a healthy diet for active children, so offer nutritious as well as high energy snacks...](#)

- [Growth charts for children](#)

[Babies and young children do not usually grow in a perfectly smooth way, but instead grow in 'bursts'...](#)

- [Obesity in children - causes](#)

[Once children are overweight, it takes a lot of effort for them to return to a healthy weight...](#)

- [Obesity in children - management](#)

[If your child is overweight, you can help by making healthier lifestyle choices for yourself...](#)

- [Overweight children - healthy lifestyle tips](#)



[You can help your child to develop healthy patterns for life and avoid obesity...](#)

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- [Dental checks for young children](#)

[Children should have an oral health check by the time they turn two...](#)

- [Immunisation history statements for children](#)

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- [Immunisation in secondary schools](#)

[Some immunisations are recommended for all Australian teenagers...](#)

- [Pain management \(acute\) - children](#)

[If you think your child is in pain, always see your doctor for diagnosis and treatment...](#)

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[The pressure on young girls and boys to be physically perfect is creating an epidemic of children and teenagers with low self-esteem and negative body image. Reporter Flip Shelton introduces us to the...](#)

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[Asthma cannot be cured, but with good management people with asthma can lead normal, active lives...](#)

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[Parents and children talk about some of the factors that can cause a child's asthma to flare up...](#)

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[Understanding asthma triggers for your child can help to reduce the risk of an asthma attack...](#)

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[Children with back pain may grow into adults with chronic bad backs, so it is important to encourage sensible back care...](#)

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[Bedwetting is a problem for many children and punishing them for it will only add to their distress...](#)

- [Children and vomiting](#)

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- [Constipation and children](#)

[A healthy diet, plenty of fluids, exercise and regular toilet habits can help relieve constipation in children...](#)

- [Diabetes - issues for children and teenagers](#)

[Many parents worry when their child with diabetes starts or returns to school...](#)

- [Fever - children](#)

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- [Bicycle safety and children](#)

[As they grow and develop, and with the help of adults, children become increasingly aware of how they can manage their own safety and become safer road and bicycle users...](#)

- [Burns and scalds - children](#)

[Most hot tap water scald injuries to children happen in the bathroom...](#)

- [Child safety and injury prevention](#)

[By making a few practical changes to your home, you can dramatically reduce the risk of injury to your child...](#)

- [Child safety – at home](#)

[The best way to reduce the risk of injury to children is to remove a potentially dangerous item or add a safety product...](#)

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[Teach your child strategies for responding to mobile phone bullying...](#)

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[Play environments can be safe and beneficial for your child. With proper planning, you can make sure your child gets plenty of playtime activity...](#)

- [Poisoning and child safety](#)

[Call the Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26 immediately if you suspect your child has been poisoned or given the wrong medicine or the wrong dose of medicine...](#)

- [Road and traffic safety for children](#)

[As they grow and develop, and with the help of adults, children become increasingly aware of how they can manage their own safety, and become safer road users...](#)

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[Scooters can travel at fast speeds and falls and collisions are disturbingly common...](#)

- [Water safety for children](#)

[Toddlers are most at risk of drowning because they are mobile and curious but don't understand the danger of water...](#)

## **Grief and trauma**

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[Child Protection provides child-centred, family-focused services to protect children from harm caused by abuse within the family...](#)

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